

Poll: Montanans support gov't-subsidized health insurance

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 12/26/06

HELENA — By huge margins, Montanans support using state government to expand health coverage to those who don't have it, according to a poll by Lee Newspapers.

More than 80 percent of those surveyed said they support expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, which covers low and moderate-income children, as well as a state program that subsidizes health insurance for employees of small businesses.

Montanans also overwhelmingly support using the state employee health plan to cover public school and local government employees, the survey showed.

All three proposals are likely to come before the 2007 Legislature, which convenes Jan. 3 in Helena.

The Lee Newspapers poll, taken Dec. 13-15, asked Montanans about a variety of issues that will be considered by the Legislature.

Between 15 percent and 20 percent of Montanans are without health insurance, and the Legislature is likely to consider many proposals attempting to reduce that amount.

Here's how Montanans answered the poll questions on health insurance proposals:

When asked if they support or oppose expanding the government-funded Children's Health Insurance Program, 83 percent supported an expansion and 12 percent opposed it. Five percent were undecided.

CHIP, jointly funded by the state and federal governments, provides health insurance for children whose families don't qualify for any other public program and earn up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level. It currently covers about 13,000 kids.

Lawmakers are preparing several proposals to expand who can be covered by CHIP.

A state program that provides subsidies and income-tax breaks to help small businesses buy health insurance for their employees had even deeper support.

Eighty-seven percent of those surveyed said they support expanding this program, while only 6 percent opposed an expansion. Seven percent were undecided.

The program began early this year and is for businesses employing two to nine people. Nearly 1,000 businesses are getting help through the program already.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer is proposing about \$20 million in funding for the program over the next two years, up from about \$13 million for its first two years.

When asked if local government and school employees should be allowed to become part of the health plan that covers state government employees, 72 percent supported the idea and only 8 percent opposed it. Twenty percent said they were undecided.

Bill drafts have been requested by lawmakers to allow local government and school employees to become part of the state health plan.

Support for all three proposals was strong among all demographic groups within the poll, including men, women, Democrats, Republicans and political independents.

Brad Coker, managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling, which conducted the poll for Lee Newspapers, said he's not surprised by the results, because "health care is an issue that cuts across party lines."

"People are paying very high (health insurance) premiums and they're being faced with large increases every year," he said. "They just want something done."